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The Role of Latin in Emblematic Funeral Decorations in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 17th and 18th Centuries

In the 17th century in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (after the Union with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in 1569), a funeral of a noble was an important social event. It was not only a private religious celebration, but also a public ceremony. A catafalque with a coffin was placed in the middle of the church. Family members gathered around the deceased and then participated in a sumptuous, several-day-long, funeral ceremony that took the form of mourning *theatrum*. During the Holy Mass they admired a structure shaped like an altar, and sometimes a chapel, called *castrum doloris* (fortress of pain), which was raised on the occasion of the funeral. The catafalque was surrounded by such architectural elements as pyramids, obelisks, canopies, statues of saints and personifications. It is worth noting that also the deceased “participated” in his/her own funeral thanks to a realistic coffin portrait made on a sheet metal and fixed on the narrow ends of the coffin at the side where the head of the deceased laid. Other typical funeral customs in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were also known, e.g. an appearance of a knight symbolizing the deceased, if he was a serviceman or State dignitary, who fell down from a horse with a great deal of noise. Afterwards banners and weapon would be broken in front of the catafalque. It was a symbol of the victory of death. The mourners took part in this performance, not only as spectators, but also as actors clad in costumes, namely in specially prepared for the occasion mourning clothes. The rich iconographic program complemented the spectacle. Furthermore, significant fragments of Latin sermons, Latin epitaphs and emblems were placed on the expensive, richly decorated mourning banners. A sumptuous banquet, whose participants showed no moderation in eating and drinking, ended the funeral ceremony. Although some clergymen and nobles attempted to break this empty tradition, no changes in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth followed. In this way nobles tried to preserve the memory of their families and to affirm the dignity and the majesty of death. So a funeral pomp (*pompa funebris*) gave way on the one hand to an emphasis of the strong family relationships, and on the other, to an expression of the faith in God.

Funeral ceremony reflected a sensual experience of death, so notably representative of the culture of the Baroque. The liturgy consisted of gestures performed by the celebrant and of words sung and read by himself and believers. The importance of Latin in the funeral ceremony is worth emphasizing. Latin was used in liturgies, in the texts of sermons issued on the occasion of the funeral, in inscriptions, as well in emblematic compositions which were an integral component of the ceremony and belonged to its iconographic program.

Contemporary manuscripts and old prints confirmed that verbal and figurative structures played a significant role in funeral ceremonies, although emblems did not have always a ternary structure. Funeral emblematic compositions comprise primarily heraldic content. They were dedicated to the glory of the deceased and of his/her family. The authors of the emblems used Latin texts, because this language was spoken by the nobles. As lemma they used both quotations from Scripture, and excerpts from the writings of classical authors. Quotations from the text of the Vulgate seemed to be obvious in a Catholic funeral, while ancient authors were read by noblemen at school, mainly in the Jesuit colleges.

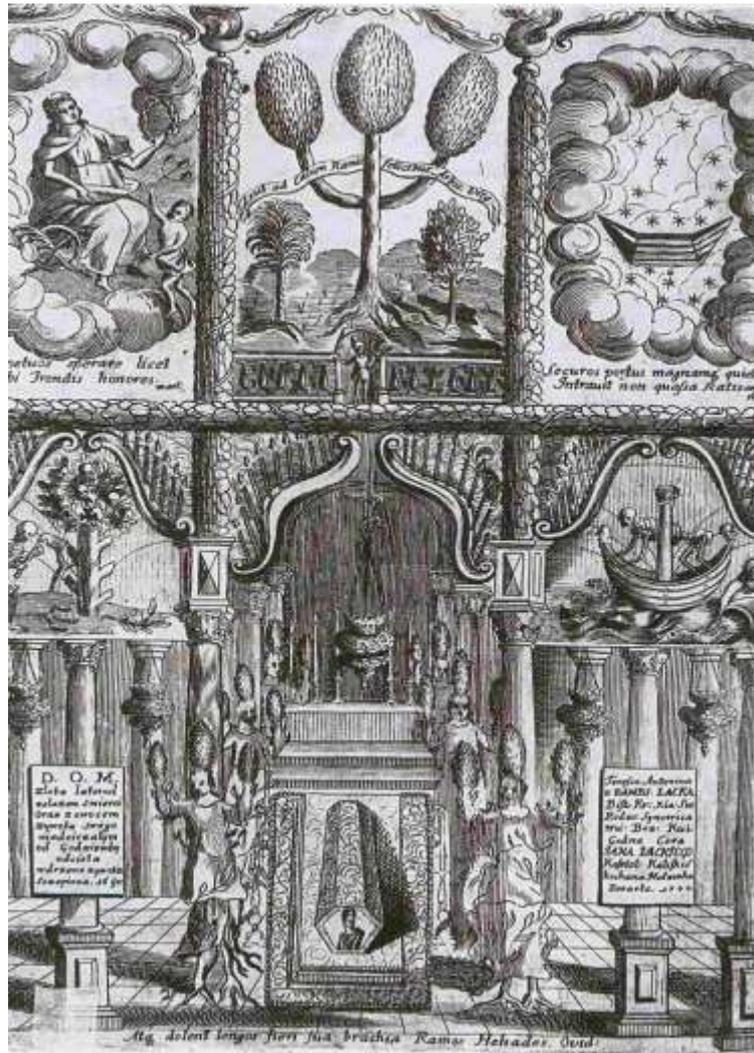
Using quotations from the Bible, together with the fragments of pagan writers, was characteristic of the Post-Tridentine era, when a synthesis of ancient tradition and Christian culture was evident. The following examples illustrate the important role of Latin texts in the emblematic decorations not only of the funerals of noblemen, but also of their wives and daughters.

Juliusz Chrościcki discussed many emblematic decorations in his excellent book on the old Polish funeral pump¹. Other scholars refer to it too, but they do not pay due attention to the role of Latin. Meanwhile, Latin inscriptions played significant role in co-creating the artistic program.

A printed brochure² issued on the occasion of the funeral of the wife of Chamberlain of Wschowa, Teresa Antonina Łącka, who died in 1700, contains a text of the funeral sermon preached by the Jesuit Stefan Sczaniecki and an engraving with a catafalque erected to commemorate the deceased. The emblematic decoration of *castrum doloris* corresponded with the oration. The preacher referred to the emblematic motifs and to the Latin quotations. *Castrum doloris* presented in the middle of the composition was surrounded by six figures of maidens with roots for their feet. Pine cones grow out of their arms.

¹ J. Chrościcki, *Pompa funebris. Z dziejów kultury staropolskiej*, Warszawa 1974.

² S. Sczaniecki, *Godziemba śmiertelny na ziemi cień z ciałem zostawiwszy do górnego raiu przesadzona*, Poznań 1700.



A slightly transformed Latin quote from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Met. 2.351) was introduced at the bottom of the composition: *atque dolent longos fieri sua brachia ramos Heliades* (Meanwhile, Heliads cry out in pain that their arms have become long branches). In Ovid's account, Heliads were mourning the death of their brother Phaeton and turned into poplars. If so, why do we see pine cones in the picture? If we consider that the whole composition is symbolic and refers to the coat of arms of the deceased, the secret will be explained. The shield of the coat of arms of Teresa Łacka depicts three branches of pine and five roots. The author of emblematic and heraldic decoration intentionally changed details – he deliberately transformed the content of mythical story to combine mythological plot with the Godziemba coat of arms of the deceased.



In front of the coffin we can see the portrait of the dead woman. The epitaphs in Polish were put on both sides. They refer also to the coat of arms of the deceased and correspond to the symbolic meaning of the decoration. A large figure of the shield of Godziemba coat of arms above the catafalque also calls for attention. Between small deciduous trees there is a huge pine with three branches and five roots. The Latin inscription is quoted from Virgil's *Georgics*: *exiit ad caelum ramis felicibus arbos* (Georg. 2 , 81: a tree with fine branches rises to the sky). This sentence can be considered as an emblematic lemma. It should be added that this phrase was quite popular in the 17th century and was applied in works of art. We can read this quotation e.g. in Wilanów palace in Warsaw, on the frieze in the bedroom of Queen Marie Sobieski in Warsaw.

The deceased Teresa is shown as St. Dorothy on the left side of the picture. We can see a boy giving a sprig of pine to a young woman. The Latin quotation is taken from Martial's epigram: *Perpetuos sperare licet tibi frondis honores* (Epigram 9, 61: you may hope the leafy honors shall endure for ever). The words by Martial refer to the holy plane-tree of Julius Caesar planted in Spain. The Roman poet confirms that nothing can destroy this tree. He mentions in this epigram a well-known scene from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Apollo says to his beloved Daphne who is transformed into a laurel tree: *Tu quoque perpetuos semper gere frondis honores* (Met.1,565: you also, bear always the everlasting honour of your foliage). The fact, that the author of the iconographic program of *Castrum doloris* quoted Martial's phrase indicates that he consciously abandoned the love scene from *Metamorphoses*, and wanted to recall panegyric content of the epigram.

The Łodzia was a coat of arms of the mother of the deceased. Its shield depicts golden boat in the red field. The figure of this coat of arms is situated on the right side of the composition and is signed as follows: *Securos portus magnamque quietem / Intravit non quassa ratis* (intact boat reached a safe harbor and a great peace). This is a slightly changed quotation from *Silvae* by Statius (Silv.2,2,140-141).

Under the shape of the deceased in the form of St. Dorothy on the left side there is the figure of Death who is chopping off the branches of a tree trunk. This is an allusion to the Nieczuja coat of arms of the paternal grandmother of the deceased. The shield depicts a trunk with knots and with a cross at the top. On the other side, the Skeleton steers the boat. This scene is an allusion to the Korab coat of arms of the maternal grandmother of the deceased. The shield depicts an ark with a mast.

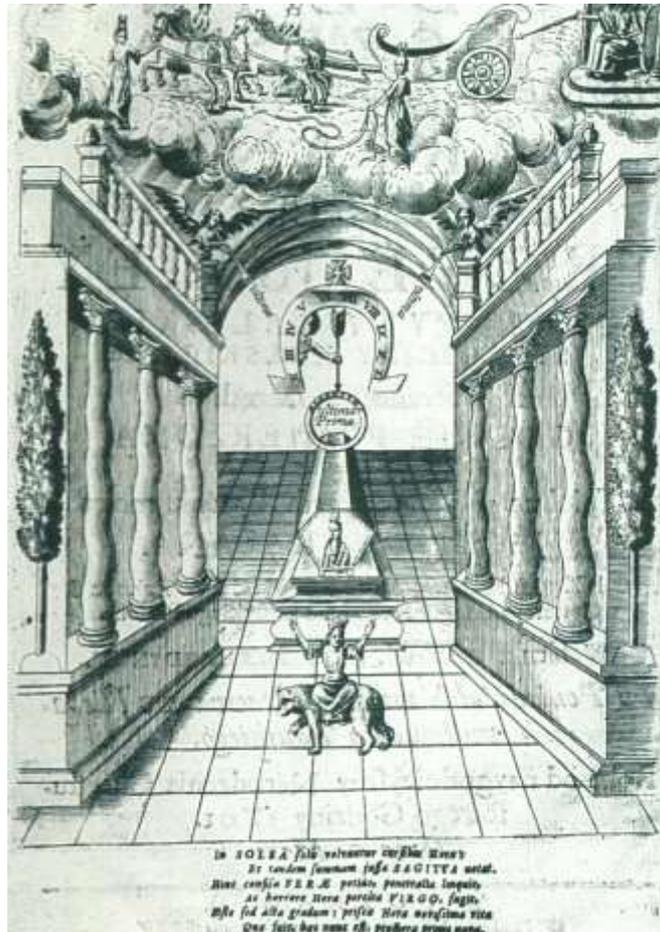
The decoration of the catafalque corresponds to this part of the funeral sermon in which the preacher gives an allegorical interpretation of the Godziemba coats of arms (of the deceased), the Łodzia coats of arms (of her mother), the Nieczuja coats of arms (of paternal grandmother) and the Korab coats of arms (of maternal grandmother). As a part of emblematic structure, this sermon could be considered a commentary.

It is worth noting that two of these heraldic figures refer to the trees, and two to the boats. Nieczuja, or a trunk symbolizes the body after death, the evergreen pine (Godziemba) - an immortal soul. Heraldic boats allow the soul to reach the port of eternity. Martial's words, quoted above: *Perpetuos sperare licet tibi frondis honores* emphasize the hope for eternal glory of the deceased and of her family. A figure of a boy with a twig is an allusion to the legend of S. Dorothy and to the mysterious child bearing a basket of roses and apples, who appeared before her to certify that paradise exists. This time a young boy confirms that the deceased Teresa Antonina is already in paradise. A quotation from Virgil's *Georgics*: *exiit ad caelum ramis felicibus arbos* (Georg. 2, 81), confirms happiness of heaven, because according to the words of Statius, the untouched boat has already reached the safe port and has found there peace.

It should be emphasized, however, that the author of the emblematic program used the quotation from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* about crying Heliads to interpret the story *à rebours*. By Ovid it is the son of the sun, who goes on a sky-journey and falls down to the ground, while Teresa Łącka is raised after death from earth to heaven. It might be worth pondering that a meaning of the symbols of the decoration is clear only if one reads and understands the Latin inscriptions, taken from the pagan authors in this case.

It is worth noting that in the printing house of Jesuit College in Poznań, another volume of poems was issued on the occasion of the funeral of Teresa Łącka. The volume includes the abovementioned quotes from Vergil' Georgics and from Statius, among others.

A printed brochure issued after the death of Marianna Mycielska³, married name Przyjemska, the wife of the Ensign of Kalisz, contains a funeral sermon preached by the Cistercian Jakub Kossowicz, and includes an emblematic engraving.



On top there are figures of Greek goddesses Horae (Hours) with a chariot of Helios. This mythological motif, as will be explained further, is inspired by the coat of arms of the deceased. The shield of the Dołęga coat of arms depicts a horseshoe with a gold cross and an arrow pointing to the bottom. The coat of arms of the husband of the deceased is Rawicz. Its shield depicts a maiden on a bear. According to the heraldic legend, an English king left a crown to his son, and all movables to his daughter. The prince locked his sister in a cage with a bear. By the grace of God, the girl tamed a wild animal and rode out of her chamber on its back, raising her hands up to the sky and calling for justice.

³ J. Kossowicz, *Godzina doczesna*, Poznań 1701.

On the heraldic horseshoe presented in the picture there are numbers arranged like on the dial. A hand issuing from clouds holds an arrow pointing to the dial with the inscriptions: *Aeternitas* (Eternity) around the edge and *Ultima Prima* (First Last) inside. These Latin words feature such inscriptions – also often placed on solar clocks - as AB ULTIMA AETERNITAS (eternity since the last one), ULTIMA HORA EST MULTIS (for many this is the last hour), PRIMA ET ULTIMA MULTIS (the first and the last for many) or OMNES VULNERANT, ULTIMA NECAT (all wound, the last kills). The graphic composition is complemented by a Latin epigram at the bottom of engraving:

In solea solis volvuntur cursivae horae

Et tandem summam iussa sagitta metat.

Hinc confisae ferae potius, penetralia linquit,

Et horrore horae percita virgo fugit

Siste sed acta gradum: priscae hora novissima vitae

Quae fuit, haec nunc est, prosperae prima novae.

(Quick hours are running at the horseshoe of sun

And finally, an arrow shot at his command reaches the last one.

Hence the girl trusting more to the animal

leaves innermost parts and, in fear of passing hours, escapes,

But hold your step, the last hour of the past life

is now the first one of a new happy one).

The epigram explains all iconographic elements and motto *Ultima/ Prima*. The last hour of the mortal life of the deceased is the first hour of a happy new life in eternity.

Not only texts of sermons from 16th - 18th centuries, but also descriptions of mourning ceremony and of decorations, entitled “relations of funerals” or “funeral diaries”, are preserved in Polish libraries. One of these descriptions was issued in 1731 after the death of Dorota Grot, married name Gembicka⁴. The deceased was the wife of Maciej Gembicki the starost of Nakło. The funeral ceremony took place in the Church of Order of Friars Minor in Labiszyn. It should be mentioned that the church was destroyed during a fire in 1720. It was rebuilt thanks to the support of Dorota Gembicka.

The funeral description indicates that church was illuminated and decorated with Latin words. The allegorical figure of Fame stood in front of the church with the Latin inscription

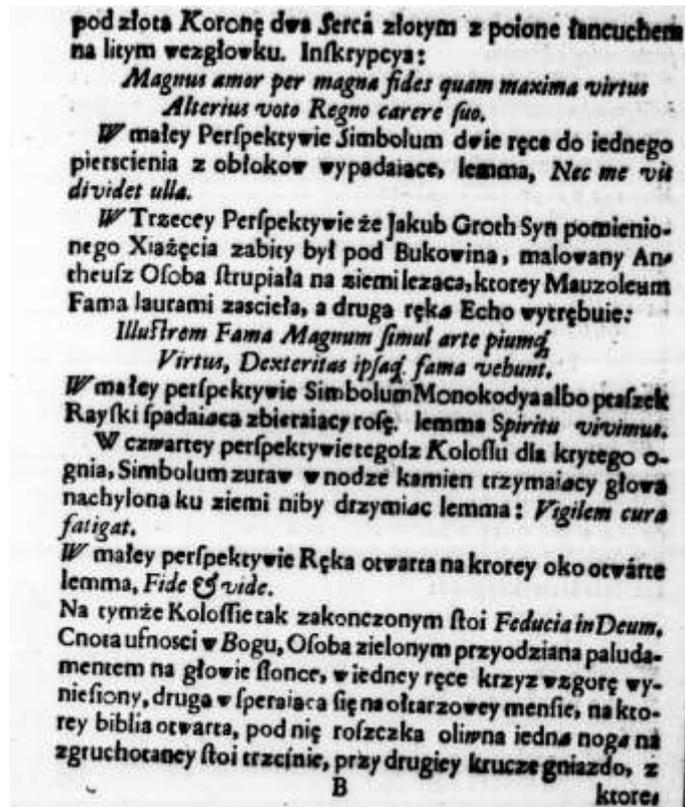
⁴ *Dyaryusz Apparencyi pogrzebowey*, Poznań (?) 1731.

addressed to the mourners, in which the deceased seemed to ask them to remember her and to cry and beg God for mercy. There were also figures of two geniuses - one with a circle, which symbolized eternity, the other with an extinguished torch. On their chests there were the coats of arms of the deceased, of her mother, and of the first and the second husband. A Latin epitaph written in golden letters and kept by the geniuses informed about family affinities of Dorota Gembicka. At the entrance to the church there was an allegorical figure of Time, who held a portrait of the deceased. The decoration in the church, as the author of this funeral description writes, alluded to the symbolism of the Rawicz coat of arms and to its heraldic figure. The main idea accompanying all the monuments was the following quote from the Acts of the Apostles (2:19): *Et dabo prodigia in caelo sursum et signa in terra deorsum* (I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below). The symbols associated with the heraldic figure referred to the sky. Heraldic maiden, as one of the 12 signs of the zodiac (Virgo, The Maiden), was placed in the middle with the sun on her chest and with Latin inscription: *Sol in Virgine* (Sun in Virgo). It alluded both to the sign of the zodiac, and to the apocalyptic woman.

In his funeral account the author gives us a detailed description of four octagonal marble monuments. They were decorated with the pictures used in the books of symbols and in the emblem texts. On the first pedestal there was shown, for example, an arrow pointing to the center of a shield with lemma: *nec citra nec ultra* (neither here, nor there)⁵. Filippo Picinelli in his *Mundus symbolicus*⁶ considers an arrow which reaches target (*sagitta versus scopum directa*) as a symbol of the righteous judge and adds the inscription: NEC CITRA NEC ULTRA. The same motto can be found in other emblem books, for example in the work of Girolamo Ruscelli *Le imprese illustri*.

⁵ Ibidem, A4r

⁶ F. Picinelli, *Mundus symbolicus*, XXII, 16, 128.



The author of the same funeral diary writes that on the second pedestal there was a lemma *Nec me vis dividet* (No power shall divide me) connected with an image of two hands reaching out from the clouds to one and the same ring⁷. Picinelli says that this lemma refers to the friendship between St. John the Apostle and Jesus Christ. The next image presented at the monuments was a hand with an eye. The famous eyed hand appears in *Hieroglyphica* attributed to Horapollo and in Andrea Alciato's *Emblematum libellus*, issued in Venice in 1546⁸. The author of the funeral account writes that the picture was adorned with an inscription *Fide et vide* (Trust and see). It should be mentioned that we find there the same lemma *Fide cui vide* in the first edition of *Nucleus emblematum* by Gabriel Rollenhagen⁹. It is worth noting that the device of Christian I of Saxony was FIDE SED VIDE. While Erasmus discusses adagium *Oculatae manus*¹⁰ (hands with eyes) which he refers to the promises covered in deeds, not only in words.

⁷ Dyaryusz, K b.

⁸ Cf. Anna Maranini, 'Col senno e con la mano': Eyes, Reason and Hand in Symbolic Transmission in: Donato Mansueto, Elena Laura Calogero (eds.), *The Italian Emblem: A Collection of Essays*, "Glasgow Emblem Studies" vol. 12, (2007), 145-156.

⁹ G. Rollenhagen, *Nucleus emblematum selectissimorum* (1611), 72.

¹⁰ Erasmus, *Adagia*, I 8, 31. The phrase: *Oculatae nostrae sunt manus* is by Plautus (*Asinaria* 202).

Among other emblems described in the funeral diary there is also the image of a swan floating on the water with the lemma: *tangor non tingor ab unda* (touched by a wave, I am not wet). The same image is present in the emblem books. We can find it for example in the Jesuit collection of emblems *Societatis Imago Primi Saeculi Iesu*.

In my paper I mentioned only a few examples of emblematic structures, which could be seen at the funeral of Dorota Gembicka. The discussed text contains also some other examples of emblematic forms and heraldic symbols. It must be stressed that all inscriptions, both in verse and prose, were written in Latin.

Funeral decorations, including visual and verbal structures were supposed to express emotions experienced by people facing a critical situation. Their authors attempted to diminish human fear and, at least for a moment, limit the omnipotence of death. Through multiple meanings in the images and language they tried to approach death from different perspectives, tame it or even find it and show the way of escape, although they were aware that this escape was in vain because one cannot escape from the super-human power. On the other hand, authors of emblematic structures attempted to put a stop to the race of a man with death, and advised reflection and contemplation. Only careful contemplation, reading and observation may help unravel the mystery of human existence, go beyond linear timeline and gain an insight into sacred time, as well as in understand that death is a part of nature and God's law, and God's judgments are inscrutable.

The visual and verbal funeral structures resonated with a natural tendency to ponder the sense of existence by the mourners. The ill-treated by fate and touched by the coldness of death mourners needed advice and guidance how to survive this difficult time. The reflections were to be helped by the concentration on the emblems, whose meaning could only be deciphered after additional effort. The funeral arrangements helped to express emotions and then to come back to ordinary life. It was a commonly held belief that the suffering, and also hope, could be better expressed in emblems with a Latin sharp motto than in simple words.

Latin inscriptions like *verba visibilia* allowed for better communication with the sacred time, because Latin was an important component of the liturgy in the Catholic rite. It should be noted, however, that funerals of nobles attracted communities of nobles. Their spiritual and moral profile was based both on the Christian faith and on the same intellectual capital gained at school.

Today, a funeral is a far more private ceremony, but it is still a form of theatrum, with a funeral mass, with a procession of relatives and friends, with the exposition of the coffin on a catafalque and a funeral lunch. Death announcements published in newspapers often contain

photographs, sentences or poems. To this day, we can read in the obituary notice a Latin quotation from Horace: *Non omnis moriar* (I will not die completely) or from Seneca: *tota vita est discendum mori* (One has to learn to die throughout life). It turns out that Latin remains the language of eternity also today.